

ARTICLE APPEARED  
IN  
108

WASHINGTONIAN  
December 1983

# God and Man at

*How Does an Intelligence Agent Reconcile Religion? The CIA Has Thought a Lot About It, and Has Concluded That the Bible and God Are on Their Side.*

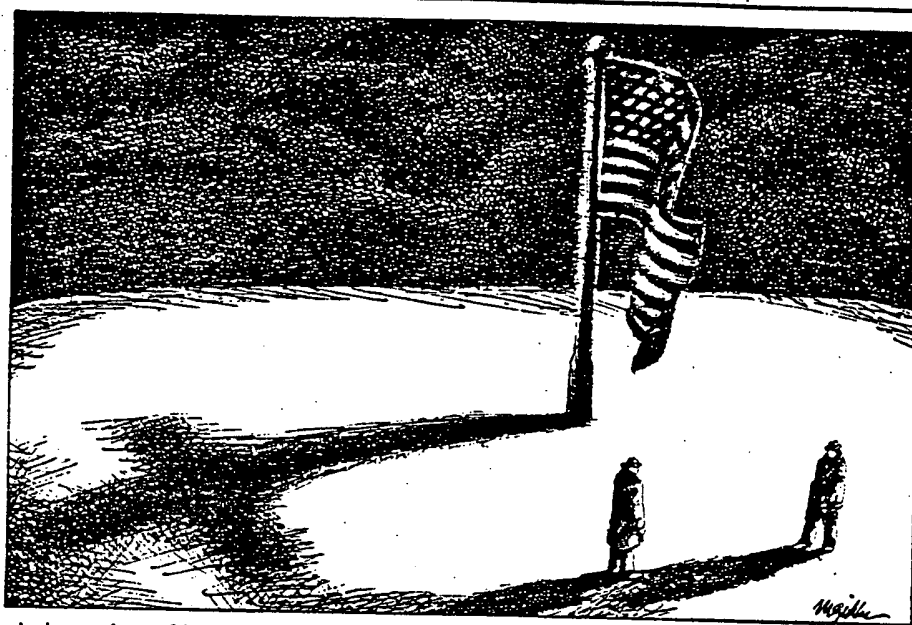
*By Dale Van Atta*

After the cornerstone of the Central Intelligence Agency's headquarters in Langley, Virginia, had been laid in 1959, CIA Director Allen Dulles cast about for a suitable inscription. What message, he wondered, would be most apropos to grace the foyer of this \$46 million monument to spying? Eventually Dulles settled on the Biblical quotation now carved in marble on one side of the entrance hall: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. John VIII-XXXII."

Ironical words, given that the CIA is the one American institution whose mission often demands distortion of the truth. The agency plants misinformation in newspapers, magazines, and books throughout the world; routinely its agents misrepresent themselves to gather the informational gold that is the currency of espionage; it once encouraged its employees to lie to Congress; and it has enshrined slippery former director Richard Helms as the CIA soldier most worthy of emulation. That so many CIA employees miss the irony of the Biblical inscription is testimony to the capacity of human beings to disregard a moral code when they're in the service of a cause or of a state.

Most CIA employee recruits hear the "basic speech," during which instructors, describing espionage as a worthy calling, proclaim that to be patriots they must work in silence and without acclaim. The speech calls spying the world's second-oldest profession ("and just as honorable as the first"), adding that God Himself founded the calling when Moses sent leaders of the twelve tribes to "spy out the land of Canaan."

In a less well-known reference, CIA officials like to note that America may owe her existence to the covert action of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumar-



chais, author of *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville*.

It was Beaumarchais who persuaded a reluctant King Louis XVI to aid the American Revolution by making it appear that the French funding came from private citizen Beaumarchais, not from the French government. In a persuasive letter to the king, which is in the CIA's Historical Intelligence Collection, the dramatist presented the moral case for covert action:

"Generally speaking there is no doubt that any idea or project that violates justice must be rejected by a man of integrity. But, Sire, State policy is not the same as private morality. . . .

"If men were angels, we ought no doubt to despise or even detest politics. But if men were angels, they would have no need for religion to enlighten them, or laws to govern them, or soldiers to subdue them, and the earth, instead of being a living image of hell, would itself be a region of heaven. But in the end we must take them as they are . . . and a king who alone wished to be absolutely just among the wicked and to remain

good among the wolves would soon be devoured along with his flock."

The Frenchman's point that covert action—and intelligence itself—is a "necessary evil" is further emphasized by CIA instructors who eulogize one of his American contemporaries, Nathan Hale, the Revolutionary War hero who, posing as a Dutch schoolteacher behind British lines, was captured and hanged for spying. His statue stands outside CIA headquarters today, and his words have been so inspirational to some agents that one former senior official carried this Hale speech in his wallet: "I wish to be useful, and every kind of service, necessary to the public good, becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claims to perform that service are imperious."

From Hale's day until the founding of the CIA in 1947, this country had resisted establishing a full-time intelligence organization. Pearl Harbor and World War II, however, overcame America's reluctance. Though public approval of the CIA has never been whole-

Dale Van Atta is a Jack Anderson associate specializing in national-security issues, including the CIA.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL GIBBS